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ABSTRACT

Few comparative studies of American Indian education have been completed. Despite the frequent tendency of researchers to generalize about the education of American Indians, little knowledge exists beyond local and occasional regional studies. Understanding the educational diversity of contemporary American Indians requires widescale controlled comparisons of many groups. Comparative research on Indian educational achievement has been limited by (1) inadequate statistical data, (2) the failure to develop a holistic model of factors influencing Indian educational success, (3) the lack of understanding of the structural links between Indian and non-Indian communities and their school systems, and (4) the lack of ethnohistorical research on Indian education. Methods required to complete the needed research are suggested. (JH)

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Differential Educational Achievement Among Contemporary American Indian Cultures

A Position Paper
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By
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Contemporary American Indian Cultures

"A Position Paper"

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Previous Research

It is surprising that so few comparative studies of Indian Education have been completed thus far. Despite the frequent tendency of researchers to generalize about the education of American Indians, we have very little knowledge beyond the slowly increasing local and occasional regional studies, e.g., Parmee (1968), Wax, Wax, and Dumont (1964), and Wolcott (1967). The few regional studies have been limited to one or two variables such as the dropout studies of Selinger (1968) and Owens and Bass (1969). Understanding the educational diversity of contemporary American Indians requires widescale controlled comparisons of many groups. The on-going national study of Indian education by Havighurst (n.d.) also contains useful guidelines for broad comparative studies. However, it excludes a number of large reservation groups and limits itself to the school system. Obviously much more than the school system is involved in Indian educational achievement.

Research Needs

1. Few broad comparisons of Indian educational achievement are possible at this time because of inadequate statistical data. The principal complaints of most researchers are that published statistics are not comparable, that they do not cover many significant topics, and that they are not up-to-date. Since neither the Bureau of Indian Affairs nor other agencies appear willing to accumulate adequate statistics, a separate national center should be

established. The present Public Health Service program to gather reliable statistics on Indian suicide is one model for such a center. The center should first determine the various types of statistics needed and then develop the means of gathering, recording, and continuously up-dating the desired statistics through the teamwork employed by the Public Health Service.

2. Our failure to develop a holistic model of factors influencing Indian educational success has severely obstructed comparative research. It is also responsible for such sterile debates as home vs. school influences in Indian educational achievement. At present most research considers a minimum number of variables such as the teacher, curriculum, economic level, and occasionally language proficiency (which is rarely well measured). Future research must systematically include quantified information on variables such as size and type of family, religious behavior and attitudes, parental employment, parental education, parental goals for children, student peer group relations, student self-concept, student attitude toward formal education, and other similar factors now known to influence formal educational achievement. The Havighurst study is making important strides in developing this model, but much remains to be done. An experienced researcher with a thorough understanding of the literature should be assigned this task at the earliest possible time. Brewton Berry's survey (1969) of the literature on Indian education is a starting point and Murdock's (1967) description of the Ethnographic Atlas contains useful suggestions for coding such information. Until we can develop a holistic model of factors influencing educational achievement, both broad comparative studies of Indian education and comparative interpretation of isolated studies remain largely unfeasible.

3. When a reliable base of statistical information and a holistic model of factors influencing educational success have been developed (points 1 and 2 above), detailed comparative studies should be undertaken. Necessarily such

studies are computer-aided in many cases, but not always. National and regional computer-aided studies would consider the detailed interrelationships between the various degrees and types of educational achievement and the many factors potentially linked with achievement. A recent, cross-cultural study by Elder (1965) which probes the interrelationships between family organization and educational achievement expresses some of the potential of these large-scale comparative studies. Non-computer, comparative studies would search through the holistic model for social structural factors related to achievement. For example, they would comparatively examine such situations as those described by Parmee (1968) and Wax, Wax, and Dumont (1964) where the education system is shown to be closely interlinked with a variety of community institutions. The obstructive influence of these structural links becomes readily apparent when educational reform is attempted. Although most researchers are aware of their importance, there is no general understanding of the links between Indian and non-Indian communities and their school systems. Of course, there are many other types of structural studies to be undertaken with the type of data base described in point 2 above.

4. Although statistical and structural comparisons are needed, they are not sufficient. We also need more and better comparative ethnohistorical research on Indian education. Clearly history is the only adequate test of educational policies and programs whose effects extend over generations. We must also overcome a deficient sense of history which has led many contemporary researchers to call for reforms already tried and partially evaluated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs such as instruction in the native language and curriculum materials that reflect the Indian student's native culture. However, this is only one type of needed historical research. We especially need more systematic comparisons of the historical factors responsible for relatively high rates of educational achievement among groups like the

Red Lake Chippewa or the Lumbee and relatively low rates among the Mississippi Choctaw or some Great Basin Paiute groups. Only controlled ethnohistorical comparisons of a large sample of Indian groups will reveal the underlying, long-range, combined effects of Bureau of Indian Affairs, missionary, and public school policies and programs.

Methodology

Methods required to complete the research described above are readily available. Survey and statistical methods have been combined with great effectiveness in recent cross-cultural research by Aberle (1961), Driver (1956), Murdock (1967), and others. The primitive, comparative efforts of ABT Associates (1968) and Havighurst (n.d.) would be improved through the statistical safeguards employed by these researchers and the typological principles they have developed. However, the few available comparative studies of Indian education show clearly that methods are only as good as the data they utilize. Telephone interviews to gather large amounts of comparative information on Indian education have clearly failed.

Ethnohistorical comparisons should be modeled on the methods now being employed by Eggan (1954) and his associates. The principal requirements of this method are close cultural similarities among the groups being compared except in the variables under examination. Although sometimes employed synchronically, this method is well-suited for the historical comparisons of education now needed among groups of American Indians with varying levels of achievement. To be effective the method also requires reliable historical data. Before valid comparisons can be made, the primary historical facts must be established. The growing comparativist school of social historians is providing a useful set of models. Berkhofer's (1963) work on the various sequences of socio-cultural changes set in motion by missionaries among Indian contains many valuable guidelines.

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